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SUBJECT: APRIL 23 BY-ELECTION A TOSS-UP

11. (SBU) Summary. The April 23 by-election for Chiba District 7 pits LDP candidate Ken Saito against opposition DPJ candidate Kazumi Ota. The media is playing up the election as the first showdown between Prime Minister Koizumi and new DPJ President Ichiro Ozawa. Koizumi has a personal stake in the by-election, LDP politicians and staffers informed us, because he wants to leave office in September on a winning note. Everyone we spoke with agreed that the race is too close to call, but the LDP is pessimistic. LDP politicians and staffers claim that Saito is "too perfect" and is having a hard time connecting with voters, but they assure us that they are not giving up, and intend to throw all their resources into winning over more voters this weekend. In an "only in Japan" wrinkle to the race, the 26-year old Ota once worked as a bar hostess and was put in juvenile protective custody after fighting with her parents in a public park. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The Lower House by-election for Chiba District 7 is the last election for Prime Minister Koizumi and he is very determined to win, a Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) staffer told us on April 20. The poll pits LDP candidate Ken Saito (46, Saitama Vice-Governor) against opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) candidate Kazumi Ota (26, Chiba prefectural assembly member). A Japan Communist Party candidate and two independents are also running, but are not expected to figure significantly in the election. Japan holds by-elections twice a year, in April and October, to fill vacant Diet seats.

13. (SBU) The media is playing up the election as the first showdown between Koizumi and new DPJ President Ichiro Ozawa. Koizumi has a personal stake in the by-election, LDP politicians and staffers informed us, because he wants to leave office in September on a winning note. One staffer predicted that an LDP win in Chiba would also help reinforce Koizumi's already solid popularity ratings. Both parties have sent a continuous stream of politicians, including Koizumi and Ozawa, to rally votes. One reporter shared that he tried to cover the Diet session on Monday, but found it empty since members of both parties were in Chiba campaigning.

14. (SBU) Everyone we spoke with agreed that the race is too close to call. Surveys conducted by Japan's two largest newspapers confirmed that the race is a "dead heat." The LDP is pessimistic, claiming that Saito is "too perfect" in the sense that he is a graduate of the elite Tokyo University, was an "elite" bureaucrat at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, and studied at both Harvard and Johns Hopkins's School of Advanced International Studies. He is having a hard time connecting with voters, they complained. An LDP staffer suggested that, even if Saito does not win the by-election, the widespread publicity he is receiving will surely help his chances in the next election. Our LDP interlocutors assure us that they are not giving up, and intend to throw all their resources into winning over more voters this weekend.

15. (SBU) The LDP camp cattily tells us that Ota is using her feminine wiles to appeal to the over-60 male crowd. In an "only in Japan" wrinkle, she used to work at a down-market hostess club and was put in juvenile protective custody after fighting with her parents in a public park. Ota hails from a rich real estate family and was known to ride to high school on a motorcycle, leading to an unsubstantiated rumor she was a leader of a motorcycle gang.

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